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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of folktales in the classroom, noting the instructional benefits, challenges and potential problems, and techniques for presenting and expanding on the stories. Of nine folktales told during the school year, five are told in English and four in Spanish, and most are closely tied to the social studies curriculum. Four stories come from Latin America and coordinate with Spanish units. Benefits of using folktales include use of authentic language and high student interest. Challenges include finding the appropriate language level and providing background information, and the potential for a story being unsuccessful with students. Pre-storytelling activities, both for the teacher and for the class, are outlined, considerations in selecting stories (content, language level, length, source) are discussed, and approaches for involving students in the storytelling are detailed. Other issues addressed include enhancing student comprehension and encouraging students' classroom response to the stories. Ways in which such stories correlate with the National Standards for Foreign Language Education are examined. (MSE)

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Folktales: A Creative Way to Involve Students in Meeting the National Standards

1997 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Language

by Susan M. Smith-Johnson

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Folktales: A Creative Way to Involve Students in Meeting the National Standards

1997 Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Language

by Susan M. Smith-Johnson

Friday, April 4, 1997

Everybody loves a story. I have always liked stories, too: hearing them, reading them, telling them. It's little wonder that I gravitated to using stories to teach Spanish. I was encouraged in this direction since the use of stories is written into the curriculum I teach. At my level, fourth grade, the Spanish translation of "The Three Little Pigs," is to be told several times during the year. My classes and I really got into the telling.

For fifteen years I have taught in an urban magnet program. Students in our building speak English as their first language. They begin studying Spanish forty minutes a day in the first grade. In addition, parts of other subjects are also reinforced in Spanish. Our emphasis has long been on the aural/oral aspects of the language, so storytelling and folktales have been a part of the program from the beginning.

Recently, I began searching for ways to incorporate richer language and more cultural connections. In addition, I had became more and more interested in interdisciplinary lessons and projects. Lastly, I wanted to be able to encourage students to make connections -- among subjects they study, between home and school, and between their interests and what we do in class. Consequently, during a sabbatical leave in 1993-94 school year, I began looking at how I could integrate international folktales into the curriculum -- not as an add-on, but rather as a lens through which the curriculum could be viewed. I looked for stories which fit the mandated curriculum. I wanted stories which represent a variety of cultures from around the world with a mixture of characters -- male, female, and animal.

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In my class room I now tell nine stories during the course of the school year. Five of them are told in English and are most closely tied to the social studies curriculum. Four of the stories come from Latin American countries and fit Spanish units: descriptions, food, family

and animals, and clothing. In my presentation here at the Northeast Conference, I want to share with you some of what I have learned, providing information which can help smooth the road for you when you try using authentic stories to teach your language class.

Benefits

There are many benefits to using stories which come from the cultures and countries studied in the classroom. First, authentic language is used as the teacher tells the folktale, communicating with the students. The story and the authentic language are also the basis for students to communicate with each other.

Next, student interest is increased. Most students like stories. Since international folktales are stories that they do not know, they want to know how it will come out. Plus, they are interested in stories which come from other countries. Because of these interests and students' knowledge of folktales in their own culture, folktales become a basis for comparisons and connections. Much can be done to extend lessons in the National Standards goal areas of communication, culture, connections, comparisons, and communities. More specific suggestions about how folktales can fit the standards will be provided later.

Potential Problems

As with any innovative program, there are potential pitfalls. I want to alert teachers to some potential problems how to address or minimize the difficulties.

How do I find the appropriate level of the target language for the storytelling? Can I find the stories in the language I need? When I have found folktales already in Spanish, the vocabulary, and sometimes the grammar has been beyond my students' comprehension level. I have found more English translations of stories. Whether I start with the folktale in English or Spanish, I have to rewrite it using a level of Spanish that my students can understand. The

process may involve some trial and error, but as teachers, we know the levels of the students. Folktales can be simplified without losing the rich language and the essential elements of the plot.

Can students really understand and follow a story in the target language if they don't already know the plot, or if they have not already heard it in English? Yes! With appropriate preparation, students can understand. They use their knowledge of story structure, visuals provided during the telling, the vocabulary presented in pre-story activities, and other preparatory activities to help them.

What kind of preparation (and how much) is needed to tell a story? One of my concerns in preparing student for a story is that I not "give away" the whole story before it is told for the first time. Still, I want students to understand the themes and key concepts. Because of my concern that the story have some unknown elements during the first telling, I sometimes made the mistake of not providing enough support ahead of time. Finding how much scaffolding is enough without being too much becomes easier with practice.

What if one of my storytelling attempts is a flop -- or at least isn't as successful as I had wanted? Well, which one of us has not had lessons that fit this category? Storytelling does not eliminate the concerns and problems of language teaching in general. We have to take chances in trying something different. Then, we must reflect on what happened, adjusting for the next telling -- or sometimes during the storytelling session itself. But, that's not new. That's part of all good teaching. In other words, with flexibility and reflective teaching, any teacher can minimize storytelling failures and recuperate when they occur.

Pre-story activities

Preparing well for the storytelling session is critically important. It can be the difference between a stimulating, challenging lesson and a failure. Preparation must be done in two areas -- for the teacher (by herself) and with the students. On her own the teacher can:

- Pick an appropriate story;
- Make a story map and learn the story;
- Consider how the language needs to be modified to fit the level of the students and the grammar/vocabulary of the curriculum;
- Practice;
- Find appropriate pictures and/or props;
- Practice; and
- Practice until she is comfortable.

Knowing the story well is critical for a smooth storytelling session. Sufficient practice allows the teacher to focus on monitoring student comprehension as well as the telling of the story.

I find that telling the folktale generally comes in the middle or at the end of the unit, since a story is more likely to fail without adequate advance preparation. In addition, to teaching or reviewing the vocabulary of the current unit, I "teach" or "practice" scenes from the story without saying that they are part of the story, or how they fit. For example, for the story about food, we use paper foods and "make" recipes. Often I use some kind of anticipation guide to get students thinking about the theme of the story. The questions or activities may be in English or the target language (depending on the language abilities of the students). For example, I might ask the question, "How do you feel when someone tricks you?" before I tell an Anansi, or trickster, story. Finally, based on pictures or scenes we have practiced, I have the students predict what the story might be about. All of these activities get the students thinking along the right track. Further, preparation provides familiar patches which build the students confidence and understanding during the telling session because of the recurring vocabulary and patterns.

Choosing Appropriate Stories

There are numerous aspects to consider in choosing a folktale appropriate for a given class. Perhaps the most important is that the teacher must have interest in the story. It is something which she will prepare for telling and use for a period of time with the students. If

the story is not intriguing to the teacher, she will not want to spend much time with it, in the preparation or in the telling. Besides, teachers communicate this dislike to their students. Another key factor a teacher should consider is that the folktale be of high interest to the students. They, too, must spend time and energy to understand. The greater the interest, the more the students will be willing to invest.

The folktale must have a theme and content to fit the curriculum. Teachers generally do not have the option of creating their curriculum, but they do have some flexibility in deciding how to best implement it. In looking at the units of study, a teacher can decide which country, culture, or area of study would work. She can look for a story which has elements which can be elaborated or extended. For example, for the food unit, I found a story that involves cooking. Then, I searched for recipes typical of the country. So, although the story said only , "She prepared the stew," as I tell the story, we "prepare" the recipes in TPR activities with paper foods. This activity is practiced ahead of time and then built right into the story. Through cooking" the students hear more of the target language and practice more of the vocabulary and grammar of the unit.

In addition to content, the folktale must fit the appropriate level of language for the curriculum. As the teacher and storyteller, one can modify the language of the story without detracting from the story. For example, stories are often told in the past tense. If students do not have a strong enough grasp of the verb forms to experience success in a storytelling session, the teacher can tell most of the story in the present tense. Further, just about any grammatical, cultural, or content point can be highlighted with a little care without distorting the basic story line. In one story, I emphasize the description of characters since the unit includes adjectives and descriptions of self and others. During the storytelling session, students participate chanting the refrain in the target language: "The turtles have the same head, same shell, same feet, same tail." Not only are the students involved in the storytelling, but they are also memorizing descriptive material.

How long is a good length? How long can students listen to, understand, and participate in a story in the target language without getting lost or restless? I would say, that with

appropriate preparation, a storytelling session can be as long as needed to adequately tell the story. The average length for stories I tell in English or Spanish is fifteen to twenty minutes. On the other hand, the story in which we use recipes, "María Angula," averages 40-45 minutes. This story, too, is usually the students' favorite because they love "cooking" and the story has a particularly unusual and exciting twist at the end. How long a teacher makes a story telling session depends in part on the number of key scenes in the folktale which can be pre-taught. What do students need to hear to understand the complete folktale as it is told in the country of origin? What can be done to include students in the telling so that they are actively involved? Finding the right answers to these questions, in many ways, makes worries about how long the story is irrelevant. Because of my personal preference, I tell stories in one sitting (during one teaching period). The stories could be divided (stopping at an exciting point, of course) over a couple of days as well if the teacher prefers.

So, where do these stories I tell come from? How can another teacher find something appropriate? There are now many places a teacher can go to find stories in the target language. In addition to traditional textbooks, many companies now offer storybooks or collections of folktales. My greatest resource, however, was the public library. Three of the four folktales I tell (listed at the end), I found in English translation. Any story had to be modified to fit the level of the students. The story I found in Spanish had grammar that was too complex and vocabulary over the head of my students. The English translations reflected the same complexity. I found that both simplifying the language of the Spanish and translating the English into Spanish achieved the same results, but the selection of folktales I found in English was much richer and more extensive. I had a much greater choice as I looked for stories that emphasized the content and grammar I sought.

How can the teacher involve the students in the storytelling?

Students need to be involved in activities before the story as well as during the telling. Below are a few suggestions I have used to catch the students' interest and to get them actively participating.

- When time passes, student count aloud in the target language. In cooking, we count the 30 minutes the food needs to bake. During a contest in which two characters hold their breath, we count out the time. This can be done by ones, twos, five's, or whatever would help reinforce what students need to practice.
- As mentioned earlier, I use Total Physical Response (TPR) activities related to food. I have prepared envelopes with pictures of foods. In addition, I give students a worksheet with pictures of a stove, oven, refrigerator, cutting board, and so forth. I have a larger set of the materials that I use to model the commands. Then as I give directions, the students follow along and prepare the recipes.
- There are often repeated phrases in folktales which students can learn and use on cue. In one story I tell, the father often advised his son, "Be kind to animals and birds." I taught this to the students ahead of time as a part of the animal unit. Then, during the telling, students could give the son the advise along with the father.
- Different groups of students can be prepared for various responses or sounds to be used on cue. For example, in the animal story, small groups can be the taught the animal sounds, or phrases that animal uses often in the story. Then, during the storytelling, on prearranged signals, the students add their noises or phrases.
- From their seats, students can act out what characters are doing: eating, climbing, running.
- During the storytelling session, the teacher can ask yes/no questions that the students can answer with thumbs up or down. Without interrupting the flow of the story, the teacher can then check comprehension and enable students to predict what is coming.

But what if the students don't understand?

Inevitably, when telling an unfamiliar story, no matter how much preparation is done, there will be times when the students do not understand. As the teacher tells the story, she can monitor the students for comprehension -- watching for their puzzled expressions, confusion in tasks, or students' lack of participation in ways she has planned for them. In addition, she can listen for comments (often in English). My students sometimes say, "But I don't understand,"

or "Did that character really do *that*?" I find that the first (and often the only) response I need is to retell the section. I use more gestures or references to the pictures. The students will often understand when I rephrase the troublesome part referring, when possible, to practiced material. I also act things out, or act things out a second or third (or tenth) time, exaggerating the action and the connections between words and meaning.

If comprehension is still lacking and I can't find props to assist in acting things out, I draw them on the board. My students and I have a running joke about my not being an art teacher, so they just laugh when I draw simple stick figures in my explanations. I do the drawing since I don't like to interrupt the flow of the story by having students draw on the board. In addition, I never shift into English during storytelling sessions. There will be some students who have not understood all the details of the story, but we go back to these in later lessons. Generally, students understand the gist of the story well enough with some adjustments during the telling. As a teacher, I believe that part of my job is to help them to recognize that they can understand the story in the target language even when they don't understand every word and phrase. My students usually get so wrapped up in the story itself, that they don't pay attention to every word. They only begin to react when they lose the thread of the story.

How can the teacher encourage students to respond?

For students to learn a language and become actively involved with the learning, they must respond. There are many possible ways, however, for students to respond. I have found that initially and spontaneously, my students responded with comments in English. When a character in a story did something they disagreed with, they would say, "No! Don't do that!" Also, some are also quick to say, "I don't understand." They are also often quick to ask questions when they do not understand. As teachers, I believe that we must allow for responses in English so that w can better understand the level of student comprehension. As time goes on and as students learn more of the target language, they will begin to respond in more than English.

I have students write a response in their journals to each story they hear. The assignment is very open-ended. I asked them to write about their favorite scene from the story, explain why they liked the story, compare it to other stories they know, or write about what might happen next. They can write in English or Spanish. Many also choose to draw pictures. Students write mostly in English. After writing we discuss the story. I encourage anyone who is interested to share what they have written. As with their other journal writing, I periodically collect and respond to their work in writing. Students looked forward to my comments and questions.

As a whole class, small group, or individuals, students summarize the story or a scene from it. Using pictures students draw of scenes, the class describes and sequences them. Occasionally parents have told me that their child came home and retold the entire story to them or the siblings (in English). To further encourage students to make connections with their home life, for each story I asked students to bring "found objects." Students are to find any object they have at home that reminds them of the story or some aspect of it. I, too, bring an object. My goal is to help extend the type of connections from the literal (bringing a lion toy when there was a lion character) to the more figurative (bringing an object which represents some theme of the story).

In class we complete various other response activities. Students sometimes complete a "report card" for a character. For example, after hearing "María Angula," students grade María in such areas as cooking, responsibility, and following directions. They love giving the grades and then discussing why they have chosen what they did. In addition, they use examples from the story in their explanations. We also share other similar stories looking for similarities and differences. Because of the level of my students' Spanish production, much of the responding they do, especially in areas that encourage deeper thought and analysis, is in English. Nonetheless, they are extending language skills. In addition, they are becoming more and more interested in the language and language classes.

I also use various activities to encourage students to respond in Spanish. Shortly after the storytelling session, students respond nonverbally to true/false statements. I read a statement about the story or a character. Students indicate that it was true (thumbs up) or false (thumbs down). Students themselves added thumbs across to indicate that they were not sure! If there are many thumbs across, I rephrase the sentence or act it out. All students respond in this way to the story. I also had them respond nonverbally to indicate whether a scene from the folktale (described briefly in Spanish) was from the beginning, middle, or end of story. I made papers with hour glasses, full, half full, and almost empty. As I describe a scene the students pointed to the appropriate picture to indicate whether it occurred at the beginning, middle, or end of the folktale.

To encourage students to produce more of the target language, students complete information gap activities related to characters and items from the story. They see these activities as games and generally like them a lot. Also, after drawing pictures of scenes from the story, students describe them, and sequence their work. I also give them listening quizzes based on the pictures they had drawn. Various other story-related activities have been developed. For instance, during the food unit, we 'cook' using paper foods and TPR commands. At the end of the unit, we cook with real food. Again, students follow commands in Spanish, but with the added benefit of being able to taste the food of the culture of the story.

More traditional responding in Spanish is also important. Students answer oral questions, respond in their journals, summarize the story or a scene, or describe a character. These activities, of course, can provide various skill levels since students within the class respond at the level that their ability allows.

How can the use of folktales fit the 5 Cs of the National Standards in Foreign Language Education?

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has been instrumental in helping to define national foreign language standards for students in

kindergarten through twelfth grade. The introduction to the standards provides some background and rationale: "More than a decade of work on defining competency-based teaching and assessment focused language educators on preparing students who can use the language in meaningful ways, in real life situations.... National standards establish a new context that defines the central role of foreign language in the learning career of every student." (*Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st century*. National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, p. 15) The standards are organized into five areas: Communicating in languages other than English; gaining knowledge and understanding of other cultures; connecting with other disciplines and acquiring information; developing insight into the nature of language and culture; and participating in multilingual communities at home and around the world.

While some teachers and programs have already moved toward competency-based foreign language instruction, they can still benefit from an examination of the national standards. I, too, have used the national standards as I looked at my curricular approach in which folktales integrate the curriculum. To help the reader understand how folktales can complement the standards and how considering the standards can enrich the use of folktales, I have created a list of connections I have found in my story telling project. Below each of the standard areas, I have identified folktale-related activities which fit that area.

Communication

- Identify food pictures with Spanish vocabulary
- Develop listening comprehension
- Talk about the story to each other and the teacher in Spanish
- Sequence pictures, describing them
- Identify scenes from the folktale as from the beginning, middle, or end
- Read the recipes in Spanish
- Identify the characters
- Complete a story map
- Act out scenes from the story

- Prepare the story as a play for others to see

Cultures

- Identify food and other products of the culture from the folktale
- Identify themes and lessons of the story and how they reflect the country
- Identify cultural traits of the people of the area included in the folktale

Connections -- The teacher can make these connections in the other subject areas if she teaches them. If not, she can work with the other teachers. The connections can also be made in Spanish class by designing content-based lessons in Spanish.

- Teach nutrition and the fool pyramid. (Health)
- Double quantities for recipes. (Math)
- Write epitaphs; describe favorite lunch on a brown bag to be used later; describe how to do something (making a recipe, eating an Oreo) (Language Arts)
- Draw scenes; design a tombstone for themselves or someone famous (Art)
- Explore how foods grow; categorize kinds of plants or animals (Science)
- Read other versions of the story (in English or Spanish); read to get further information about the culture or country (Reading)
- Find the country on the map; identify latitude and longitude of major cities; discuss how geography of the area affects the culture (Geography/History)
- Find appropriate e-mail partners, websites, and newsgroups -- several suggestions are listed at the end of the article. (Technology -- This area is generally not a separate subject, but is integrated into other areas. I mention it separately because many valuable connections can be made to other cultures, people, and ideas through the Internet and e-mail.)
- Encourage students to connect what they learn about the story and culture to their own life; designing activities to include aspects of connections, comparisons, and communities; provide outlets for students to communicate in the target language to express what they feel, learn, like, etc. (Personal connections)

Comparisons

- Compare culture of the story and students -- roles of characters, etc.
- Compare various versions of the folktale - from around the world
- Compare clothing in the story to what the students had expected or to their own clothing
- Compare measurements in recipes in the target culture and the students' own
- Compare kinds of food eaten
- Identify cognates used in the folktale
- Compare idiomatic expressions in the story with what students use in English

Communities

- Celebrate the Day of the Dead in Mexico and Halloween in the US.
- Create and act out skits of restaurant scenes -- in US and/or the culture being studies.
- Visit a local Latin American restaurant, esp. if workers there will speak in Spanish.
- Taste food of the culture.
- Find penpals or e-mail pals from the culture/country being studied.
- Find a teacher in the country who will tell the same story and do similar activities so that they can compare and correspond.
- Prepare the story as a play for parents to see.
- Search out appropriate websites and newsgroups, especially those in Spanish. (Several suggestions are listed on the last page of the handouts.)

Conclusion

Telling authentic folktales in the target language can become an integral part of the foreign language classroom at any level. Student (and teacher) interest increases. connections to the five "C's" of the national standards become more viable.

Through this presentation I have tried to provide practical advice to teachers who would like to use stories to increase authentic language. By presenting benefits and pitfalls, I hope the reader will learn enough to be able and willing to tell stories in his/her classroom. Try it, you'll like it! Then, let me know how it goes. Maybe we can help each other extend and expand the storytelling we do with our students!

Internet Resources.

Technology now enables teachers to make international connections much more easily. If a school has computers and Internet connections, searches are easy and enriching. Either the teacher or the students (if they have the know-how), can search out folktale topics and related cultural information. I have listed a few resources here. There are many more which can be found to suit the units and folktales chosen.

Newsgroups

soc.culture.latin-america

soc.culture.peru (There is probably a newsgroup specific to the country you are studying.)

rec.travel.latin-america

rec.food.recipes (I have used this newsgroup to find an appropriate recipe. It is for cooks and not specific to any one culture, but often posters include international recipes.)

Websites

http://www.city.net/ This site is a great place to start to find information about a city of interest. Some of the information is in the language of the country and some is in English. I found, for example, information about Quito at: http://www.city.net/countries/ecuador/quito/

http://www.ypn.com/living/travel This the beginning page which can help you get information from the 'Net about travel to different places in the world.

http://www.lonelyplanet.com.au/dest/sam/peru.htm This site has a lot of information about Perú. Lonely Planet also has a sites for many other countries.

http://www.twingroves.district96.k12.il.us/ForeignLangInternel/ForeignLanguage.html This site provides many Web resources in many languages.

Folktale Resources

Here are the stories I tell to my classes. I have included those that I tell in Spanish first and then the ones I tell in English related to the social studies curriculum. They show the range

of possibilities. Once a teacher begins looking, at the library, bookstore, or on the Internet, she soon sees that the number of folktales available is overwhelming. The question will not be, "How can I find a story which fits my purposes?" but rather, "How can I pick just one folktale from among so many good choices?"

Told in Spanish:

Bandalee. In Sherlock, Philip M. (1954). *Anansi, the Spider Man: Jamaican Folk Tales*. New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Co.

María Angula In Uribe, Verónica. (1984). *Cuentos de Espantos y Aparecidos, Coedició Latinoamericana, Quinto edición*. Sao Paulo: Editora Atica. (Ecuador)

Old Man and the Beanstalk. In Hughes, Brenda. (1962). *Folk Tales from Chile*. London: George G. Harrap and Co. (j398.H89 C)

The Youth Who Made Friends With the Beast and the Birds, In Carpenter, Frances. (1969) *South American Wonder Tales*. Chicago: Follett Publishing Co. (j398.C22) (Peru)

Told in English:

Lion and the Little Brown Bird, The. In Savory, Phyllis. (1966). *Lion Outwitted by Hare and Other African Stories*. Chicago: Albert Whitman and Co. (j398.0967 S 268) (Ngoni from Malawi)

Scarface. In Grinnell, George Bird. (1962). *Blackfoot Lodge Tales: The Story of a Prairie People*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Scheherazade. In *Arabian Nights*. (1993). New York: Grossett and Dunlap.

Sing-Song of Old Man Kangaroo. In Kipling, Rudyard. (1912). *Just So Stories*. New York: Doubleday.

Three Ravens, The In Muller-Guggenbuhl, Fritz. (1958). *Swiss-Alpine Folktales*. London: Oxford University Press. (j398.M96)

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